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Wagenaar, Neal Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Interview with Neal Wagenaar
Interviewed by T. Padric Moore on 3/17/99
History 201 - Larry Wagenaar's Michigan History Class
Spring 1999 Semester

PM: ...I'm from Hope College, I'm a sophomore and I am interviewing today Neal Wagenaar.

My first question for you is: What part of the Netherlands are you from?

NW: From the province of North Holland, the city where I was born, or "town" was Heerhugowaard, which is a polder close to Alkmaar in the province of North Holland.

PM: What was it like living there? What was the city like? How big?

NW: It was just an agricultural area. We had one long street running through the polder, plus a diagonal street and a lot of ditches or canals. You might remember from hearing about it. At age six I went to school, walking about two miles on my wooden shoes.

PM: Did you enjoy wearing wooden shoes?

NW: I might say yes because the handy thing about it is that you go out in the fields you get dirty feet and you just kick them off and walk right into the house.

PM: Do you still have a pair of wooden shoes?

NW: Oh yes, we do.

PM: Do you wear them often?

NW: No. Only on stage when we do something at Evergreen Commons.

PM: About what year did you move to the United States?

NW: Initially I was by myself in January of 1950, went to the United States by boat. Went to work for a seed company, Associated Seed Growers (ASGROW). No sooner did I start working there did I have to register for the draft and was drafted shortly thereafter because it was during the Korean War.

PM: If you don't mind, can we back up a little bit? Can I ask you why you decided to go to the United States?

NW: My dad was in the flower bulb business, which of course in the Netherlands is basically an exporting business, and he always (this was before the war now) was talking about exports. I was a young fellow, my dad did not come back after the war because he was in the resistance movement. He died in the concentration camp. After he did not come back, I started going to his costumers myself and did some work there. And somehow, in the back of my mind I had this thing that I wanted to go to England or the United States. Adventurism.

PM: And you said that you went by yourself completely? You didn't go with any friends or...?

NW: Yes, by myself.

PM: What concerns did you have about leaving your home country?

NW: One of the concerns, of course, is that you're walking away from your family. And since I was the oldest boy, I did feel kind of different about that, and I didn't like it. Initially, I thought that I would come back. But once I got here, I didn't come back because I had to make a quick decision to be drafted and go into the Army or go back to the Netherlands and never be able to come back again. That's what they told me at that point. So, slowly, after I got out of the Army then I felt so American that I wanted to be here and stay here. There were other reasons too--lots of Hollanders were coming to the United States and going to Canada too during that period, the five, six years after the [WWII] war. So, it might be said it was an immigration fever.

PM: You said that the Dutch settlers came here and to Canada... what prompted you to come

to the United States rather than Canada?

NW: It was a lot easier to come to the United States. I knew that when you went to Canada you had to work as a farmer and be a little bit of a slave for several years before you got onto your own feet. I was just in a different area of work. I was in bulbs, so I got to work with a seed company here working with bulbs.

PM: And that was ASGROW?

NW: Yes.

PM: Could you tell me more about that job? What was it like?

NW: It was an interesting job. When I got there, they had crates and crates and crates full of gladiolus and later on in the season, flower bulbs, which they were basically shipping in small quantities as premiums to the ladies buying soap. In other words, when you went to buy soap in the store you could fill out a coupon and get your bulbs. We were shipping them all over the United States.

PM: Where was this?

NW: Cambridge, New York. By Albany.

PM: You started out in New York?

NW: Yes.

PM: That's where I'm from.

NW: So then, this company was also a seed company. They were shipping these big racks to all these different stores on consignment which happened in the spring. They had to be picked up in the fall, which was mainly done by teachers, but I was one of them too that was roaming around the country picking up all these racks. So I got to drive around the

eastern states a lot, which was interesting.

PM: So you chose to come to New York state, in the beginning, because that is where the business was and where you could easily get a job?

NW: Yes.

PM: How did you make contact with that job?

NW: I wrote in on an add in one of the trade papers when I was still in Holland.

PM: So then you got drafted into the Korean War. When did you begin feeling like an American?

NW: Well, I guess basically when I was in the Army, bumming around with these folks. Learning the language best I could.

PM: Did you know English before you came here?

NW: Oh yes, had four years of English in school, as you do with other languages, French and German. That's standard fare. I came here with a basic knowledge of the English language, which was pretty good after you've had four years of it. But my pronunciation was very English because I learned it from listening to the radio during the war. You come here and you try to modify it and try to become a midwestern, although I was drafted for Texas (laughs), to go to Texas.

PM: After the war, where did you go?

NW: Then we went to Kalamazoo.

PM: Is that when you met your wife?

NW: No. I met my wife before I went to the United States. I got together with her again when I was in the Army on leave when my grandpa died in the fall of '51. Then we became

engaged. Six months later, I was shipped to Germany, close by Frankfurt, and then we got together again and we got married.

PM: When did she come to the United States?

NW: She came with me when I went back to the United States for discharge. December, 1953.

PM: Could you describe some of the problems you faced adjusting to life here in the United States?

NW: Well, that's hard to say. The language problem is one of them. At first you don't quite fit because you might have a few difficulties communicating. Then of course, you have to accept the fact that you are different because you are a Hollander. There are customs to be learned and business practices to become accustomed to. Since I was studying for CPA and working for a CPA in accounting going out to different businesses, I felt I had a good environment to teach me to become more accustomed to the environment.

PM: Did you know anyone in the United States when you came here?

NW: I had an uncle who had come here before, who was married already. I had some friends from the same town where I lived.

PM: How did the move affect you and your family?

NW: You're referring to the family I left behind, I suppose? At first, as I said before, I thought I would come back. I told my mom, "I'll be back, you know." But then it became clear later on that I wouldn't be back. She had her difficulties with some of the younger kids without a father, basically never experienced a father because they were so young at the time. She missed me a lot. I felt guilty about that, but couldn't do anything about it. Although from the very beginning, I thought she and my brothers and sisters would come

over. At one point they were about to, but for several reasons a decision was made that they would not come over. Then of course, I had to say to myself, "That's the way it is."

PM: Do you miss them? Do you visit them often?

NW: We went back five or six times. My mom has been over here quite a bit. Mary's sister comes here every year now.

PM: So you are still able to keep contact with everyone?

NW: Oh yes, we are going in September again. Mary says she's always remained a foreigner-- and in fact is true. I felt probably less so then she, because I had more of a chance to learn the language better because I was in business.

PM: If any, what traditions did you bring with you that are still part of the family?

NW: Basically the religious tradition which was the Christian Reformed as you might consider it here. Church, which has of course changed a lot in the last twenty or thirty years. Other than that, it's your food that you eat. You may go back to the Dutch store and buy some goodies that Americans have never heard of or don't like. Like almond cake and certain raisin breads.

PM: Are there any holidays that you still recognize, not American, but Dutch holidays?

NW: No. They had Queens Day, birthday of the Queen, but when we came here we never did that anymore.

PM: Do you like the American holidays?

NW: Sure.

PM: Do you celebrate them all?

NW: Yeah, pretty much. Not St. Patrick's Day, if you call that a holiday, which to me is kind

of an ethnic type of thing.

PM: We kind of talked about this already, but what was the most difficult adjustment for you to make?

NW: I had always a feeling that the Netherlands was kind of small. And before long, I would like to spread out a little bit, I would like to know the world better and experience the world better. I really cannot say that there was anything particular which I missed. In the old country, as young as I was, I was in business for myself. Here, I became an accountant and I somehow thought if I learned this accounting and the business practices, maybe I could start a business for myself, which never happened. Now you might say, this fellow could have gone and set up his offices, and yes I could have. But I found out, to be good and do well in individual CPA business, you have to be quite a guy. I didn't want all that pressure. So I got to work for a corporation as chief accountant.

PM: Sounds like a good job.

NW: Yes, it was.

PM: What influenced your decision to move from New York to Michigan?

NW: I came out of the Army, and I could have gone to the old seed company, but there were so many Hollanders here. And now I had married my Dutch wife, I thought it would be better for our children and ourselves to be in this area here rather than there.

PM: Why is that?

NW: Well, because you can communicate with the old folks in Dutch language and customs and some of the get togethers (festivals). Also, Christian school was available here.

PM: When you moved here to Holland in 1967, what were your first impressions?

NW: Of the city of Holland? Well, Mary had allergies, quite bad. Every time we went to the lake, to camp, she felt better. So we felt the clean air coming across would be better for her--so it was. So I went to Holland to see if I could build a house, which we did. We have lived here ever since. The beauty of it was, that you could walk up five minutes through the dunes and you are at the lake. We have a community access to the lake, so all these years it's just been a nice place to be.

PM: What do you think of the politics of Holland?

NW: Politics are provincial, but they are basically sound because Ottawa county is growing by leaps and bounds compared to other counties. It's a good place for business.

PM: Is it a nice city? You just like it in general?

NW: Yes.

PM: Why have you stayed in Holland?

NW: Because I got to work for Bil Mar Foods. When I was 43, I thought I better settle down and accumulate my little retirement fund, stay with the same company.

PM: In what ways have you been involved in the Holland community?

NW: With our church, I've been elder and I've been doing accounting for twenty years for the church. I have not been involved with any of the committees, public or otherwise, in the city of Holland.

PM: Do you vote?

NW: Yes. I was a member of the Republican party for some time. Now my wife is a Democrat and I'm a Republican (laughs). She likes Clinton and I don't!

PM: What influenced your decision for which church to attend?

NW: Basically, the Christian Reformed Church is the same as the Gereformeerde in the Netherlands. And I might add, the Reformed Church, as well because they are very close, especially now. When I got married I said, "Hey, there's no real difference, we're both Reformed," so we just went to the Christian Reformed Church. The Christian school is a main stay for the Christian Reformed Church, which is not so much the case here for the Reformed Church. The Reformed people, by and large, do not go to Christian school, although some do. That was a reason to join the church, and the church supported Christian schools which you then have to support.

PM: Increasingly, Holland has becoming more culturally diverse. When you see newer immigrants settling into Holland, how do you feel?

NW: It's basically a matter of "roll with the punches" when things happen and when things change. It's a way of accumulating wisdom as you go through life that you have to make these adjustments. I guess it is human nature to somewhat want to resist others encroaching upon your domain you might call it, and you see it all over the United States.

PM: How do you feel about the Hispanic community?

NW: I myself, I'm a pragmatist. I think whatever happens, happens. You cannot fight wars about these things, and you certainly may not be unchristian about it. So you have to look upon them as human beings and some are of your own religion. Love them as much as you do your other friends and neighbors. Sometimes, that is put to the test, I imagine, but we have not yet been tested.

PM: Have you had any conflicts?

NW: No, we have not had others from Mexico or from wherever or inner city Grand Rapids

come to live right next door and have to be neighbors and successfully operate.

PM: What if they did? How would you feel?

NW: Well, it would be fine.

PM: Do you see them (meaning perhaps the Asians or the Hispanics) facing similar problems or opportunities that you faced when you first came here?

NW: Oh yeah.

PM: Like what?

NW: Opportunities that they have to recognize, as we did hopefully, and I think we did, that you must educate yourself to the job availability which primarily, first of all, involves learning the language properly. Certainly, not keep on going with your own language--or you'll be stuck.

PM: That is a good point. Do you think that the Hispanics are taking advantage of these opportunities yet?

NW: I think the Asians do a better job than the Hispanics do with their dual language.

PM: Would you like to elaborate on that?

NW: They feel that, and I'm not too familiar with it, that they have to preserve their culture which is all right. But it must not go so far as to not educate the child in the English language so that he or she becomes held back in school. Immerse them into the English language and environment as much as possible and the parents will come along and they will do well.

PM: Do you consider Holland a Dutch city still?

NW: Yes. It is. But it is becoming less so.

PM: What do you think the future holds?

NW: The future holds a fifty-fifty population and some clashes between the cultures.

PM: What kind of clashes do you see that may happen?

NW: Political clashes. Again, I think one of them goes back to the language. You might see the time that the Spanish want to mandate dual language instructions on forms, etc. Which is already the case on certain federal forms, right?

PM: I think so.

NW: And the telephone, to speak in Espanol, push button two, and English button one.

PM: Are you kind of upset about that?

NW: No.

PM: Would you have liked that if they did that for the Dutch people?

NW: No! I think that is putting the cart before the horse.

PM: How do you feel about Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve such as Tulip Time...?

NW: Tulip Time of course is the mainstay. A city is fortunate if it has a festival, and I think that the Dutch festival is a good festival for us to have.

PM: How do you feel about Tulip Time? Do you enjoy it?

NW: Yes we do. As seniors, we are running a show. So we don't attend Tulip Time festivities much every year, because once you've seen it four or five times, you've seen it, right?

PM: I guess so, I've never seen it.

NW: You might pick up something here and something there, but it isn't like, "Oh, I'm going to see Tulip Time," like a tourist. In fact, my bosses, the De Witts of Bil Mar, never went to

see Tulip Time, of course they live in Zeeland. And I never, before I came to the United States, went to see the cheese market in Alkmaar where I went to school. But you, or anybody else, might go there on a trip and this is a highlight, to see the cheese market. I saw it a couple months before I went to the United States. I said, "Hey, I've got to do this because, otherwise, I can't even talk about it."

PM: That's a good idea. You say you run the show? What do you do?

NW: The seniors have Tulip Time show at Evergreen Commons, which is basically a musical song and dance show. It hauls in buses of mostly seniors from all over the United States. We make good money for Tulip Time and for Evergreen Commons, which is a senior center.

PM: Do you feel that the community celebrates your heritage well?

NW: Oh yeah.

PM: Have you experienced any discrimination in Holland?

NW: We have not. Of course, that is not to say the same about other ethnic people, but no, we didn't.

PM: Have you ever seen other Hollanders facing discrimination?

NW: I don't think so. I don't feel that way. No.

PM: What paths have your children taken? I know that Larry is a professor at the Archives.

NW: Right. Frank is a chemist for Abbott Laboratories. Allen was in business for himself in video first, and then he became a salesman of promotional products. And now he is in head-hunting business, obtaining personnel for businesses.

PM: Do they (the children) speak any Dutch?

NW: No. Here's a good point....When we came here, with what we knew, we thought we ought to speak English, and that they ought to, and we learned from them and they would learn the language real well--which they did. So we never spoke any Dutch in the house. Now they don't know any Dutch. There was one time we tried speaking Dutch, but it disturbed the conversation because they didn't know enough and we knew too much. There was a lack of communication between us.

PM: What would you say to a friend who was considering moving to the United States?

NW: I would say; if you are kind of fed up with the lack of opportunity there, then you have lots of opportunity here if you apply yourself and work hard. If you don't like it, you can always go back.

PM: Well, that's all of the directed questions that we're supposed to ask. Do you have any stories that you would like to share from being here in the United States from a Dutch perspective? Can you think of any?

NW: I have a hard time doing that. From a Dutch perspective? We were fortunate, let me say that. Our opportunities were prepared by people who came here before, and that is not only the Dutch, although in this particular area they mostly were, but also by the American economy and all the people themselves. It so happened that after WWII, there was a surge of increase in professions and business and scholarly opportunities, so any immigrant would be able to take advantage of that, if he could, if he was willing to. I think that the immigrants who came before WWI and maybe even before WWII, had a much harder time, because they had to homestead it out in the wilderness. Which, especially when you read about the very first immigrants, was very hard. A lot of people

lost their lives, and when they became ill there were no opportunities to go to the hospital and there were no doctors. So, our bed was, more or less, made for us immigrants post WWII.

PM: So, you are happy you came here?

NW: Yes.

PM: What is your best experience here in the United States?

NW: My best experience, from a professional point of view, was that I was able to study and went through CPA examination, passed it and got my certificate. I was happy in accounting and the business world in which I was working.

PM: Thank you very much for participating.

NW: You're welcome.